

The Allies of Religion

A SERMON BY

ELWOOD WORCESTER

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A SERMON
PREACHED IN ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH
PHILADELPHIA

ON THE OCCASION OF ITS
CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY TWENTY-FIFTH
NINETEEN TWENTY-THREE

BY
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For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.—1 Cor. 3, 11.

FELLOW CHRISTIANS AND FRIENDS:—

IT IS a great joy to me to stand again in this sacred place, and to be permitted to take part with you in this happy service of commemoration. As time is reckoned in America, one hundred years form no inconsiderable fraction of our country's history. When St. Stephen's Church was founded the United States of America, reckoning its birth on July Fourth, Seventeen Hundred Seventy-six, was in its forty-eighth year. President Monroe was serving his second term, having been re-elected in the Ninth General Election by a vote which was practically unanimous. In this very year, 1823, he enunciated his famous "Doctrine" which, on the whole, has served our country so well. Three years before, the Fourth General Census had recorded a population of 9,638,191 persons, of whom nearly eight million were white, and more than a million and a half were colored. The Treaty of Ghent, which had ended our last war with England, was less than ten years old. Our States, including the District of Columbia, numbered twenty-seven. Twenty years before, the vast territory, vaguely termed Louisiana, had been purchased from Napoleon Bonaparte for

fifteen million dollars, and Illinois, with a population of fifty-three thousand persons, was our westernmost state. At this time Philadelphia was the second largest city in the United States and contained perhaps one hundred thousand persons. The bitter conflict looking toward the emancipation of the slave had just begun. St. Stephen's Church was designed by the most famous living American architect, William Strickland, who also designed the old Custom House on Chestnut Street, after the model of the Parthenon. Seven years after this parish was founded the first American locomotive was built at West Point, New York; but it soon blew up, as the engineer, annoyed by the sound of the escaping steam, had fastened down the safety-valve.

All this sounds remote and prehistoric enough, but it startles me to think that of the century of continued life St. Stephen's has enjoyed, more than one quarter of these hundred years has elapsed since the day in October, 1896, when I came from Bethlehem to be its Rector. Such is life! There are many illusions we entertain in regard to it which are beneficent, but there is one illusion which is dangerous. It is that life is long. On the contrary, it is very short, and every year and every passing day seem to say: "Oh! make haste!"

The last time I had the pleasure of visiting you, in the midst of one of your fine blizzards, about two years ago, I gave an account of every interesting event I could recall which had taken

place during my rectorship. I was a little sorry this sermon was not printed, as it would have formed one of the chapters of the history of your parish. I shall not attempt to retrace that ground, and today I do not mean to speak of the past, but of the present and the future. And yet I cannot refrain from expressing my gratitude to God and to you for the years of peace and happiness I spent here. No spot on earth is dearer to me than this old street and this old church. This was my first parish, and I have always retained for it the sweet memories of a first love. Whatever mistakes and weaknesses I was guilty of were the mistakes and weaknesses of youth and inexperience, not of sloth and indifference. Indeed, I have often wondered at the amount of intellectual labor I performed in Philadelphia. Much of my philosophy of religion and life, on which I have built ever since, was worked out here, and was first offered to you. Much of my study of the Bible and of the religions of mankind, which the overwhelming practical duties of my later life cut short, was done here, and I am unutterably grateful to you for giving me that opportunity. This was largely due to the fact that in those days I was able to work all day and also most of the night. And what I say, I believe all your other Rectors, dead and living, would corroborate, were they able to speak,—that some of their best and happiest years were spent in this church.

In my day, Dr. Montgomery, the Founder of this parish, had already become merely a name, about which no legends clustered. Dr. Ducachet was remembered for his many witty sayings and aphorisms. The spell of Dr. Rudder's preaching and personality still lingered. The noble and chivalrous Dr. McConnell was a living power and his was always a name to conjure by; and since my day Dr. Grammer has done more than we all to conserve St. Stephen's and to perpetuate its power and influence in the days that are coming.

What are these days likely to be, and what will they bring forth for religion and the church? I believe that those persons who, dreaming of the future, represent it as devoid of religion are utterly wrong. The very reverse is what they ought to say. The religious faculty in man develops so rapidly with his other forms of development, that, as Renan says, "A humanity twice as wise, twice as strong as ours would be more than twice as religious." I have watched the fluctuation of sentiments in this country for more than forty years and I am certain that in my lifetime interest in religion was never so deep and so universal as it is now.

It would be strange if it were not so. We are living in the greatest and most critical days the world has ever passed through, and, humanly speaking, anything may happen. No age, since history issued from the womb of time, ever witnessed such changes as this world has under-

gone in the lifetime of men and women who are not yet middle-aged; and we know that these changes have not ceased, they have only begun. Many a thing today is dead, for all its future usefulness, which does not know that it is dead.

A few years ago many persons entertained the curious expectation that our soldiers, as the result of their spiritual experiences and their sacrifices in the Great War, would return home, bringing with them the vision of a new world and a new life. No such change was perceptible. Most of them came as they went. He that was righteous, was righteous still. Yet during the war, we who remained at home saw a very wonderful change pass over this country which, had it continued, might have altered our whole life. It seemed as if a new and greater Spirit awakened in us all, from the least to the greatest, a spirit of consecration and of unselfish devotion. Men and women appeared to rise above themselves, to cast off their ordinary limitations of sloth and selfishness and to be united in a vast enthusiasm of service. A true sense of brotherhood awoke which broke the bonds of class and caste that had so long divided us. The physical need, the moral and spiritual disposition of the humblest men and women suddenly became a matter of concern and solicitude to us, and messenger boys rode gaily in the finest cars.

If this spirit and enthusiasm for service had been conserved and had been directed to our

permanent and real task, which is never war but the annihilation of human misery and the amelioration of human life, there is no problem before our country or the world which could not have been gloriously solved by the men and women of this generation. We felt, at that time, very much as the Disciples felt on the way to Jerusalem—that the Kingdom of God might immediately appear. But apparently such a vast outpouring of devotion can only be generated automatically, under the threat and stimulus of mighty catastrophes. As soon as the immediate object we had set ourselves was attained, another change followed, courage fell, enthusiasm gave place to lassitude and license, and we entered one of the most humiliating periods of our national existence, which God grant, is nearly ended; for thus far we hardly know what we have gained.

And yet, though the Disciples' expectation of the immediate coming of the Kingdom was deceived, and the world continued on its old way, a new age really dawned on the day when Jesus died in utter obscurity, and a new spiritual power then entered the world which has changed our higher life forever.

However mistaken we were in our former expectation, there is no mistake in the belief that a new era has dawned on the earth. One of the great periods of the world's history has definitely ended and another has begun. So great an overthrow and destruction can be

followed only by a commensurate reconstruction, and we may be very sure that the world which is rising will not be built on foundations which proved too frail and too treacherous to sustain the old world. For good or evil, or for good and evil, the power of the past, of clinging, impeding, and at the same time, of staying, steadying custom, tradition and habit is largely broken, and something new is about to take place under the sun. We feel very much as St. Paul felt when he declared: "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid * * *. But let every man take heed what he buildeth thereupon, for the Day will try it."

After the Napoleonic wars more than a hundred years ago, there followed a period of mediocrity, frivolity and moral weakness which Balzac has portrayed for all succeeding generations in the hundred volumes of the Human Comedy. Then the great forces of the Nineteenth Century slowly shaped themselves, and began to give form to one of the most splendid periods of intellectual and material advance this world has ever known. It may be that the spiritual forces of the New Age will require an even longer period of incubation before they break forth into life and stamp our time with the sign-manual of its genius, but they will certainly emerge and produce creations in proportion to the new strength of the human race.

As nothing radically new, except the grotesque phenomenon of Russian Bolshevism, made its

appearance as the result of the war, we can only suppose that the future, as usual, will issue from the past, and that our former achievements will be the tools and implements by which the new world will be fashioned. I shall therefore make a brief inventory of our new, or more recent spiritual and religious assets, as they appear to me, those things of the soul, solidly rooted in thought, knowledge and experience, which are alive and able to act. And first I make mention of our great faith, our faith in science. I do not know where one could turn to find anything like it, a faith which so many educated men hold with such assurance and with so little doubt, a faith that has so vindicated itself by its works. If it has sought, it has also found. Think of Luxor. Its discoveries in every field, material or spiritual, theoretical and practical, pour in so fast that the most industrious student cannot keep pace with them, and no human mind, ever again, will be able to master their whole domain. In consequence of these vast findings a new sense of power and of hope has come to the human race that it never possessed before. No claim is too spectacular, no expectation too chimerical to stagger our credulity. One or two men assert that by scattering electrified sand from an aeroplane they can dissipate the fog from London and the soot from Pittsburgh, and cause the sun to shine and the rain to fall at their pleasure; and it is regarded as good as done, and the price of arid

land in the West goes up, just as when Père Grandet got out his fur gloves in the fall, the villagers would say: "It will be a cold winter, Père Grandet has put on his fur gloves." Suppose that the Bishop of Pennsylvania or the Bishop of New York should tell us that by his prayer or his powerful thought he would make the sun to shine and the rain to fall. We should only feel sorry for him. If Bishop Lawrence should undertake it, a good many people in Massachusetts would believe that he would at least raise the wind.

This faith then is a fact which must be reckoned with. No weapon raised against science will prosper, nor do people pronounce against reason oftener or more emphatically than reason pronounces against them. Our only protection against the crudities and negations and materialism of science lies in more and better science, just as the only solution of the age-long antagonism between religion and science lies in making religion more scientific and science more religious. One of the great spiritual achievements of the future will certainly be to close this gulf, to heal and integrate this dissociation of our two noblest faculties.

Over against all this is a fact we shall never forget until we lose our memories in senile decay. Science can never be the supreme guide and teacher of mankind because, in itself, it is non-ethical. It is just as willing to serve a murderer as it is to serve an honest man. Poison gas is

to it as the sweetest perfume. When, at last, science succeeded in invading the sky, it was not to pour down peace and good will, but wrath and destruction on the children of men. It does not ask whether things are good or bad, whether they are right or wrong, but only whether they are fit or unfit, true or false. We have invoked a genie which already has forces at his command capable of annihilating all that man has created, and unless the spirit of man is capable of directing this power for good, it will destroy him. In other words, science, which is only a cross-section of reality, is our servant, not our master.

Another spiritual asset modern man possesses is a philosophy which gives him a criterion of truth and which enables him to distinguish the knowable from the unknowable. This is a great safeguard to us in that it deters us from entering those barren fields of metaphysical and theological speculation where words are everything and sense is nothing. Where nothing is offered to our sense and experience reason has no true material to work on. The ancients, the General Councils, the great schoolmen and theologians of the Middle Ages were not aware of this, hence they built their imposing castles in the air, and they appeared to explore and define the inmost recesses of God's being. On these subjects we must remain agnostic. Bishops who have not read or understood Kant may fret at this and talk about heresy trials, but it is not this or that clergyman who opposes them, it is the

limitation of the human mind. Jesus never undertook to deal with such questions, and he offers nothing to those who agree with Him on intellectual grounds. The only ground on which He deigns to meet with us is the ground of the will.

Another spiritual asset we possess today which will be more to us in the future than it has been in the past is our critical knowledge of the Scriptures, a possession gained for us by more than a hundred years of devoted and wonderful work. Let no man imagine that this is but a passing phase of opinion, or the pre-occupation of a few scholars. Our religion is an historical religion which derives almost all its power and inspiration from the personality and teaching of Jesus Christ. No effort therefore ought to be too great for us to learn, as well as we are able, to know Jesus. As far as the Gospels are concerned, the results of the best Bible study are briefly as follows: In the first three Gospels we have three variants of a unique and original tradition which in general form and outline is much the same in all. This is unique because in the whole body of early Christian literature there is nothing else like it.

Of these Gospels, St. Mark's is undoubtedly the first and the oldest, not merely in the priority of a few decades, but in its more primitive conceptions, in its graphic realism and in the human traits of its presentation. A very ancient tradition asserts that its contents were

dictated to St. Mark by Simon Peter, and much of the Gospel bears the imprint of an eye-witness.

In the preparation of his Gospel St. Matthew made use of the whole Gospel of St. Mark and he also had at his disposal the incomparable Logia, or the priceless sayings and connected discourses of Jesus. St. Matthew wrote for the Hebrews, and he was very fond of introducing quotations from the Old Testament, sometimes forcibly.

Some scholars today believe St. Luke's Gospel to be older than Matthew's, though I imagine the majority still think it to be later. In either case Luke has preserved several sayings, especially the two greatest of all parables, the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, which we find in no other source. His great pre-occupation was the poor and the lost. His Gospel is the Gospel of a Savior's love.

Today all scholars, with few exceptions, are agreed that in the Fourth Gospel which we call St. John's, we find something radically different from the Synoptics, and that what we find there is not the history of the human life of Christ, but the philosophy of that history, the most profound and touching which we possess. It is he who boldly identifies Jesus with the Logos or the Word of the Stoics and the Neo-Platonists. Many of the sayings are so different in their range of thought and vocabulary, that it is hard to believe that the same being spoke as St. John represents and as the Synoptics represent Jesus as speaking. The Gospel begins with the

total suppression of the dark scene of the temptation in the wilderness and with the substitution of the bright marriage feast in Cana of Galilee. Most of its miracles are new and different. Its only allusions to the human birth of the Lord simply designate Him as the Son of Joseph: "We have found him of whom Moses and the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." The demoniacs who left such an indelible impression on the earlier Gospels altogether disappear and are never mentioned. Above all, Jesus' expectation of the immediate coming of the Kingdom, which time had disposed of, is allowed to fall altogether, and in its place is the heavenly house of many mansions to which Jesus will welcome His own after death.

Perhaps the most important fact which the study of the New Testament has brought to light during the last fifty years is this expectation of the coming of the Kingdom of God in the immediate future, and Jesus' consciousness of His own Messiahship. It is this discovery which has given to Jesus' death a meaning worthy of the sublime facts, and which, without embarrassing us with theories of atonement, causes it still to stand out as the central fact of this world's history. It has rendered impossible any more rationalizing, belittling Lives like Renan's and it has destroyed liberalism's picture of Jesus, as a mere teacher of morality, by showing that no such person ever existed. Though under this study Jesus has returned to His own cen-

tury, yet He is there so anchored to its thought and life that no mythologist will ever again succeed in dissolving His personality into a zodiacal myth or an incarnation of man's religious aspirations. The most fundamental doubt in regard to Jesus, the doubt of His existence, it has ended.

I have given myself little time for two other important spiritual assets we have at our command, but I shall allude to them. The first is the discovery of the soul which has been made in our day, and the whole new psychological approach to religion which this discovery has brought with it.

In the whole history of thought man has made three revolutionary discoveries, revolutionary in the sense of changing forever his estimate of himself and of the world in which he lives. The first of these discoveries is that of the revolution of the earth and the other planets around their central body begun by Copernicus, and finished by Galileo in the seventeenth century, a discovery which gave us a new heaven and a new earth. The second is the discovery of Evolution in the nineteenth century, which changed all our conceptions of Creation and of man's past history, and of his place in Nature. The third is our discovery of the nature of the soul and the part played by subconscious elements of mind. We are still too near this last revelation to appreciate its magnitude or its unending importance to our personal lives. With it a new phase of human evolution has begun.

With it man has already definitely entered in a new phase of development, and the age in which we are living will be known as the Age of the Spirit. As we look back to the Animal Man of the past, so we may begin to look forward to the Divine Man of the future, of whom we already have one perfect example in Jesus Christ, divine, not merely in His personal character, but in His knowledge and employment of spiritual laws and forces. From this point of view the Mighty Works of Christ regain all their ancient power.

Strange to say this discovery has been made largely through our growing knowledge of the soul's diseases (a non-existent thing ought at least to have the grace not to be sick). Here is a welcome opportunity to apply scientific method to religious truth and to the improvement of life. It would not be an exaggeration to say that already hundreds of thousands of persons are rejoicing in this new faith and in their closer walk with God. The soul and the things of the spirit which used to seem so vague and unreal, have become concrete realities. Prayer, instead of being a mere duty or a wearisome exercise, has become a joy and a necessity of our lives. From this point of view the whole person of the Redeemer comes nearer to us, His words and sayings are more intelligible, and His great acts are real, credible and congenial to us, because supported in so many instances by our own experience. Those persons who reject our interpretations on the ground that

acts so explained are not real miracles, utterly miss the mark. We are not clamoring for miracles in the old sense of causeless events or exceptions to the universal laws of Nature. What we wish to do is to validate the mighty works of Jesus and to point out from contemporary experience their inherent probability and that such stories as are told in the first three Gospels could not have been invented. From this source new faith and strength and energy flow to us every day, while those who reject this approach are finding it increasingly difficult to retain their old faith.

Lastly, I advert to *Psychical Research* as a true friend of religion and a spiritual ally of man. It also is simply the application of the best scientific methods men have been able to fashion to the examination of supernormal phenomena and to the problem of death. I make no plea for it, I simply state what it is. Almost all men who have acquainted themselves with its spirit and method have at least acknowledged its legitimacy. Those who scornfully reject it simply pronounce their contempt for experimental science. It also illuminates many an important event in the life of the Lord and it helps us to understand and accept occurrences which otherwise we should reject. I think particularly of the phenomena attending the baptism of Jesus, His appearance on the sea of Galilee, His Transfiguration and, above all, His Resurrection appearances to His disciples.

Moreover, this is our only real hope of solving the problem of death. From no other source is any new solution of this eternal mystery likely to come to us. Philosophy, having satisfied herself of the futility of her former efforts to gain this knowledge, has abandoned it, and for a long time has been as mute as a fish on the subject, and unless science can establish immortality by evidence we must remain agnostic and without much hope. But without immortality no idealistic philosophy of life is possible.

A hundred years ago a similar problem presented itself to the world of thought in the question of the possibility of life in the profound abysses of the ocean, and philosophers and men of science, by every sort of clever, a priori argument,—the enormous pressure of water, the stygian darkness, the absence of vegetable life for food—proved the absolute impossibility of such life. At last the Challenger set forth on her ever-memorable voyages and let down her deep-sea dredges into those abysses, and to the amazement of philosophers and men of science, those dredges came up filled with every form of life, from almost microscopic forms to veritable sea monsters.

Today man is confronted by a deeper abyss—the abyss of Death. Is there life there? We may continue to argue about it as men have argued about it in the past, some affirming it, some denying it. But there is only one way of settling the question; that is by designing deep-

sea dredges, instruments of precision fashioned by our present knowledge of abnormal psychology, capable of laying hold of and identifying life, if it is there,—life in the sense of human personalities, able to identify their existence by their memories and past associations. In other words, the problem today is a question of ever-accumulating evidences, not of dogmatic pronouncements. This was the way Jesus took. His contribution to immortality consisted in rising from the dead and in showing Himself alive to His disciples.

The whole theory of materialism centers on the assumption that what we call "the soul" is but the result of the functioning of the brain and nervous system, and that it must necessarily perish when they perish. Bring forward convincing evidence of a soul in the possession of its memories and affections which has lost its brain and nervous system by death, and what becomes of that theory? The quest is a very difficult one, far more difficult and complicated than those who have not studied it can imagine. It is perhaps as difficult as the study of the Gospels and the Life of Jesus was to men one hundred years ago and it may take as long to solve the problem to the satisfaction of the world.

These are some of the new allies of Christianity and the spiritual life which will help us in the days that are coming. Behind all these there stands the august figure of Jesus Christ and His incalculable influence on the souls of

men. Be our sentiments what they may, as far as our life contains elements of real hope and value it springs from Him. We have seen Christ's ideals and commandments reviled and set at nought, and the ideal of brute force and ferocity substituted for His law of love, only to dash itself to pieces against the spiritual laws of this universe he divined; and once more we thankfully return to Him. The ideals of justice and the rights of man, on which all democracy rests, sprang from the bloodshed on Calvary. The ideals of love which kindle our hearts were spoken by His lips. The liberty and fraternity for which the whole world sighs, are the bases of His religion.

Be our sentiments in regard to religion what they may, be we believers or skeptics, mystics or atheists, at the bottom of his heart every good man is a Christian inasmuch as the principles on which he has framed his life are Christ's and in that we know we cannot invent or originate these saving truths for ourselves, but must receive them from Him who could invent them. We cannot find a foundation strong enough to sustain the world we are building save the foundation He once laid.

Nineteen centuries of Christian thought and experience have taught us lessons we can never forget, and which no denial or folly of man can tear from us. Conceptions of honor, of duty, of respect for the rights of others, of charity towards the unfortunate, of pity for the oppressed,

of horror of unjust violence, of hatred of tyranny and abhorrence of perfidy and crime have entered into our very blood and have become the established principles of our life. These are our Christian heritage and part of the unsearchable riches of Christ.

"Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid."

The last two paragraphs contain a reminiscence of pages of the Portuguese writer Henrique de Mendonça.